THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS
- A PRAGMATIC APPROACH OF INTERROGATIVES

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Abstract

The present article intends to draw attention towards the necessity to handle interrogatives in the appropriate manner, in order to convey the intended message. It means to prove that a well-built question may be able to imply, suggest, even impose its answer to the recipient; therefore, it might be considered as a soft act of manipulation in communication.

Keywords: interrogatives, communication, sender-receiver, manipulation.

Motto:
"Effective questioning brings insight,
which fuels curiosity, which cultivates wisdom."[2]

Being a paper on how to ask questions, does it mean it should start by asking a good question? Then, what makes a question a *good* question? What would a good question be like in this case? Why do people ask questions? When are people going to stop asking questions, if ever?

People have plenty of reasons to ask questions; they need to find information about their lives, the environment, about their fellows. They need to improve their skills and abilities; they need to discover what the world offers and expectancies are.

Everybody asks questions: at home, at school, at the office, at the market, on the bus, at the doctor's. We ask questions mainly in order to obtain information, but also to offer information regarding our status, desires, expectations and needs. For instance, a child asking his mother whether she bought bread, could imply that he is hungry and would like some cereals; or a teacher asking the students if they need help in solving the exercises, would imply that he is there to offer his assistance, and so on.

They say that "there is no harm in asking questions." The only harm would yet be in case the questions were not wisely built. An apparently simple question might bear an entire load of significance and expected answers, depending on the circumstance in which it is being uttered and the interlocutors. For instance, a simple question like "Where are you?" uttered by mom to her daughter might mean: "I want to know your whereabouts, if you are safe, if you need anything, etc." Or a question like: "Do you have questions?" asked by a teacher to her students, might imply that she wants to check on their understanding of what has been taught in class, to test their ability to design further questions starting from the information offered and also offer her assistance in case of any misunderstandings.

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[2] According to Chip Bell, http://thinkexist.com/quotes/chip_bell/

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In *The art of powerful questions*[3], Eric E. Vogt at all., makes us aware of the fact that "The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative insights, they can ignite change."

Effective questions are questions that are powerful and thought provoking. According to Irene Leonard[4], "Effective questions are open-ended and not leading questions. They are not *why* questions, but rather *what* or *how* questions. *Why* questions are good for soliciting information, but can make people defensive so be thoughtful in your use of them. When asking effective questions, it is important to wait for the answer and not provide the answer. When working with people to solve a problem, it is not enough to tell them what the problem is. They need to find out or understand it for themselves. You help them do this by asking them thought provoking questions. Rather than make assumptions find out what the person you are talking to knows about the problem."

We need to admit that there are questions which are endowed with the strength to generate action and reaction on the part of the interlocutors. In case questions are built wisely, we should be able even to manipulate our interlocutors into answering according to our expectations. Thus, a question should be powerful enough to stir the attention and interest of the listener, challenge the conversation into becoming a meaningful exchange of information, generate energy and induce change in attitude, ignite creativity and provoke thought. More than that, it should be able to generate further such powerful questions, in order to create a "larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change."[5]

We should, therefore, be able to design a question in such a manner that our interlocutor does not feel provoked, judged or harassed by the word we uttered. We should be ready to listen and understand, to read between the lines, to interpret body language generated by our question. Our intent to find the answer should be stated clearly from the beginning, with no room for interpretation or ambiguous hints. But, how often does this happen? How often do we pay attention to how we ask the question, to how our question is perceived by our interlocutor? How often do we really listen to what the spoken and especially unspoken answer is?

For a while now, people have been debating on issues like "comfort zone", "self-sufficiency". It is a fact that some people more than others feel a constant need to find out more, to evolve, to change. One thing is, undoubtedly, true: it is the prerogative of

[3] Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, *The Art Of Powerful Questions, Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*, US, 2003, p. 1
[4] Irene Leonard, The Art of Effective Questioning: Asking the right question for the desired result. The Value of questions, http://www.coachingforchange.com/pub10.html
[5] Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, op. Cit, p. 4

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the human being to be curious. Thus, we should think of questions as aids, tools to use in order to stir our curiosity. For that, a question needs to be powerful, smart, to stimulate thought: "A vital question, a creative question, rivets our attention. All the creative power of our minds is focused on the question. Knowledge emerges in response to these compelling questions. They open us to new worlds."[6]

According to Marshall Goldsmith[7], "Quality questions have a multiplier effect on learning. Ask an information-seeking question and you get only an answer or a fact. Ask an understanding-seeking question and you unleash a more powerful chain of events. The human brain is often compared to a computer, but it's very different. Most computers are information-storage devices. Ask an information-seeking question, and the computer goes into a retrieval mode. Ask an understanding-seeking question, however, and the mind has to make up an answer. Computers cannot make up answers. An understanding-seeking question stimulates mental activity that creates insight. As the mind turns to respond to an understanding-seeking question, special new synapses are activated, triggering an insight experience. The more the mind experiences creative discovery, the more it hunts another insight. This pursuit of insight or discovery is *curiosity*. To the mind, curiosity is its own reward. The by-product of perpetual curiosity is wisdom."

There isn't any field of human activity that is question-free. Probably one of the most resourceful domains would remain the teaching process, since it is a field built on the basis of giving and receiving data that aims at the formation and information of the individual.

In her online article[8], Maryellen Weimer wrote about the teachers' need to design thought-through questions in order to receive worthwhile answers. Thus, she suggests teachers should try hard to *prepare thought-provoking questions*, to *play with the questions*, since "questions promote thinking before they are answered. It is in the interstices between the question and the answer that minds turn", to *preserve good questions*, as "If a question does generate interest, thoughtful responses and good discussion, that's a question to keep (...) Do we need to be reminded that probing questions about the content, not only encourage students to think, they are good grist for the mill of our own thinking?". In the same time, teachers are challenged *to ask questions they do not have the answer to*: "Students tend to think that teachers have all the answers. Could that be because we answer all their questions? Marshall[9] makes a point worth remembering. "Typically we ask students questions that we already know the answer to and if any of you are like me, while the student is answering, I'm quietly thinking how much better my answer is and how I will quickly deal with the student's answer so I can then give my answer. Asking a question you don't

[6] Verna Allee, *The Knowledge* Evolution, cited by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, op. Cit, p. 8
[7] Marshall Goldsmith, *The art of asking questions*, http://www.talentmgt.com/articles/6709-the-art-of-asking-questions, 2014
[8]http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/art-asking-questions/#sthash.N9AEy56V.dpuf
[9] Marshall, Goldsmith, *From Shakespeare on the page to Shakespeare on the stage: What I learned about teaching in acting class*. *Pedagogy,* 6 (2), 2003, pp. 309-325. cited in http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/art-asking-questions/#sthash.N9AEy56V.dpuf

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know the answer to lets students know that you still have things to learn. Asking students those questions and then thoughtfully attending to their answers also indicates that you just might be able to learn something from a student. Could this be a way to motivate them to ask better questions?"

Following the same line in advice, we should not *ask open-ended questions when we already have an answer we're looking for* as "Sometimes students offer answers but they aren't the ones the teacher wanted to hear. If you aren't getting the answer you want, don't play the "try to guess the answer I have in mind" game. It reinforces the idea that the question has one answer that the teacher thinks is the right or best answer. If the teacher has the answer, students are quick to conclude it's the definitive right answer, and that makes it an answer that they won't spend any time thinking about."

Regardless of the field of human activity, be it education or business, inter-human relationship or marketing, designing good questions has always been an important aspect of communication as, in order to act, interact and react, people needed to deal with and cope with information.

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